

WHALE HUNTING

By MARK SULLIVAN.

HE was a Norwegian, but his sea English was as good as the king's. He was big and muscular, with a rare combination of weight and wiriness. His face and eyes were stern enough when he shouted orders from the bridge, but, when playing the host in his cabin, as merry as a Santa Claus—without the whiskers. His skin was tanned by the salt spray and burned by the sun of every degree of latitude where ships have ever been. He had caught whales in every sea, from the Persian gulf to Baffin's bay; and a few years ago he abandoned the old way of New Bedford and all romance—the three-year-long, round-the-world cruise in a sailing vessel—to try the adaptation of steam to whaling. For the big brick oven on the deck to boil the blubber (which all remember who know The Cruise of the Cachalot) he substituted a permanent factory for refining the oil, located on the northern shore of Newfoundland. From this he steamed out to the whaling grounds each morning and back at night, rarely without a prize. For the old method of throwing a harpoon by hand from a small boat he substituted a harpoon gun from the bow of his whaler; and with these improvements conducted a business that will soon make the few surviving New Bedford sailing whalers as obsolete as wooden plows.

I lay in his spare bunk, across the narrow cabin from his own, and dropped to sleep as he finished a tale, strangely like Kipling's "Three Sealers," of a fight between rival crews for a dead whale in the Okhotsk sea. Only a minute later, it seemed, I bumped my head against the top of the bunk to the quick awakening of an excited Norwegian craft cry from the top of the companionway. The captain leaped from his bunk. He waited not for shoes nor for other clothes than those he slept in, but bounded up the steps, shouting orders as he ran. While I dressed I could feel the quick stopping, the short advances and retreats of the engines, and I knew we were stalking game. When I reached the deck the captain had one hand on the gun, swinging it about on its pivot. With the other he was making signals to the engineer to stop, to go forward a little, or to go back. Following his eyes, I caught sight of our game. It looked like a huge, cigar-shaped piece of smooth, shiny, slate-colored India rubber, rising at regular intervals so that four or five feet of his diameter and 40 feet of his length showed like a mound on the smooth water. With alternate rising and dipping he was gliding smoothly forward, without apparent exertion, but with tremendous speed, and in a perfectly straight line. We were approaching him from behind at an angle, so that his course and ours were the sides of a V.

The captain on the raised platform in the bow, following with the mouth of his cannon the course of the whale, was the personification of alertness. The crew were grouped behind him as eager and expectant as if they had never caught a whale before. One of them touched me on the shoulder and pointed silently a mile away, where a dozen other whales were spouting fine columns of vapor. When I turned again to our whale he had risen once more, and we were within 30 feet of him. Every person on the ship was in a state of tip-toe alertness. Suddenly came the crash of the gun. I saw a hideous red zigzag gash on the broad side of the whale; I heard the rumbling roar of the time bomb at the point of the harpoon exploding in the whale's vitals. On deck there was a convulsive pandemonium. The captain, in the delirium of the hunter at the death of his quarry, was shrieking shrill staccato orders. The crew were leaping to their posts. Suddenly I felt the bow of the vessel give a jerk beneath me, then tremble a moment, and slowly dip.

The whale had gone straight downward. The rope attached to the harpoon shot over the bow so fast that the

eye could not follow; where it touched the wood a curling column of smoke arose. The windlass spun round like a boy's top. It hummed and buzzed with the noise of a flying locomotive. Coil after coil of rope leaped into nothingness like a magician's flower pots. Gradually the windlass ceased to spin. The whale had touched bottom. The captain signaled to back the ship, lest he should come up afoul of the propeller. The rope floated slack on the water. There was a minute or two of silent, expectant suspense. Then, right in front of the bow, so close I could have poked my finger against the flabby blubber, up rose the giant nose—up, up, up till he towered full 15 feet above the rail! I jumped back in genuine fear that he would topple over on the deck. Then he turned a somersault with a splash and drenched us all. He rose again, churning the water white, raised his tail quite 20 feet and slapped the water with a noise like a thunder-clap at our very toes. He turned round and round, wrapping the rope about his huge body, then shot straight forward on the surface, skipping from wave to wave like a swallow. He reached the end of his slack rope with a jerk that shook the ship from stem to stern. There was an instant tug of war between the whale and the reversed engines. Then the whale won and for a minute pulled the vessel forward with him.

Again the windlass whirled and whizzed, but with diminishing speed. Far out at the end of his two miles of rope, the whale churned and lashed the water and blew big blasts of hot vapor. The crew saw the end and relaxed their tenseness. They gave him half an hour or so to end his convulsions. Then the captain shouted the order to wind in the rope.

As the whale felt the pull he gave one feeble, dying jump. The men stopped a minute, then continued slowly to pull in. Finally, the huge, inert, flabby body floated belly upward, just off the bow. They lowered a boat, passed a chain about the narrow circumference where the tail widens, and grappled him to the side of the vessel. I could see a dozen quarreling porpoises eating the tongue of the monster that had been an hour before alive and, to those scavengers, invincible. The captain gave a sigh and a smile of content and leaned over the side to measure with his eye the size of his prize. The crew busied themselves with loading the harpoon gun again and putting things in order.

All this was before five in the morning—and before breakfast. After the meal, when we came off deck again, there had risen a heavy Iceland wind. The captain sniffed it and glanced at the choppy sea. "Twill be a bad day for the feesh," he said; and went aloft to his bridge to watch with his glasses for another "blow." With the wind came rain, and the two did, indeed, make bad fishing. Not that the whales went in out of the wet, as an irreverent sailor must tell the guileless landmen; there was scarce a time when we could not see a dozen "blows" within a five-mile radius. Often, when we were not prepared for them, they would swim right past us with all the dignity of an ocean liner speeding past a bobbing fishing craft. They never seemed to be merely browsing idly around—they were always swimming in a straight line, and always very fast, as if they had important business somewhere on the coast of Sweden. When they were close by we could follow them readily with the eye, and see them rising and dipping at regular intervals. Farther off, milestones of their course were their "blows." It is the one conspicuous mammal characteristic remaining to this expatriated land animal who has chosen the environment of fish for his abode; once in so often he must breathe. And as his taking breath involves blowing a 20-foot high pillar of white vapor into the air, it is this "mark of the beast" and of the beast's natural habitat that betrays him to his enemies.

Late in the afternoon the captain on the bridge swept the sea with his glasses, and saw no sign of a "blow." He glanced at the sinking sun and measured with his eye the 20 miles to

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the harbor. He dropped his glasses and gave a quiet order that meant the day's work was done. The deck was out in order, and the stocky little whaler, with her trophies grappled close to her side, set her bow towards the mainland. It was not for the want of "fish" that we had fisherman's luck that day. But the whaler was no larger than a tugboat. The heavy sea tossed her about like a cork, and aiming a cannon with so unsteady a base as the whaler's bow was difficult business even for the expert captain. Three times he fired and missed; and as it took an hour or two to reload the gun and prepare the harpoon and bomb, it was two o'clock in the afternoon before we got our second prize. The process was in all respects like the first; but there was the same frenzy of excitement aboard the ship. The one appetite that never becomes satiated, the one instinct that is never satisfied, the one experience that no amount of repetition dulls, is, it seems, the instinct to hunt and kill. In primitive man it was the first law of his being; and, like the whale's breathing, it stays with him in a wholly changed environment.

The captain slowly paced the bridge and puffed a long cigar in profound content. I judged, by what he had told me, that his individual share in the day's catch would be a successful lawyer's income for a week.—Boston Transcript.

Tendency of the Times.

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